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Review of Hassall, M. 2017. *Roman Britain: the Frontier Province. Collected Papers.*

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BOOK REVIEW

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Matilda Holmes

Hassall, M. 2017. *Roman Britain: the Frontier Province. Collected Papers.* Warminster: Hobnob press. 291 pages (Hardbound) £18.00. ISBN 978-1-906978-42-6

This collection of papers represents 30 years of work on Roman inscriptions by Mark Hassall. Arranged chronologically, Roman literary examples are included from the earliest military inscriptions until the late Roman writings of the 4th century. As a volume of collected papers, each essay has been published previously so cannot be considered an original work. It does, however, bring together a large body of work (20 essays) that allows a wide range of diverse Roman sources to be compared and analysed together. The original content of the essays has not been changed beyond basic corrections of typographic errors. While this allows the reader to access the information as it was first presented, there is no room for the thematic discussion of trends or patterns arising from the individual essays. Nonetheless, a considerable breadth of subjects is considered, spanning from life in the army and urban households to direct evidence for administration, religion, education, and trade.

Part one explores early military history (AD 43-122) through two essays. The first essay considers the location of legionary fortresses, describing the movements of Roman legionaries around Britain during the second half of the first century. The mobile nature of the legions is emphasised, providing a good picture of the nature of the military presence in Britain at this time. The second essay provides more specific evidence for the presence of the highly skilled Batavian soldiers (who could ‘swim rivers fully armed’ p.17), and the timing of their engagement in Britain.

Part two considers the role of Britain as the frontier of the Roman Empire in the second century. Following the military Conquest, the Roman presence in Britain is studied from numerous literary sources including inscriptions on stone, coins, wood, metal, and pottery. The essays provide case studies into this evidence from the very edges of the Roman world – Hadrian’s Wall and the Antonine Wall. They encompass details of life, date periods of change and provide insights into the art associated with the Roman army.

The third part, and most substantial section of the book, considers Britain as an established Roman province, focusing on six areas: the army, administration, towns, religion, education, and trade. Epigraphy relating to the army illustrates the many and varied aspects of life in the military. This includes the identification of individual soldiers, the organisation and movement of the army and associated auxiliaries and civilians, and the celebration of campaign successes, such as, ‘the slaughter of a band of *Corionototae*’ (p. 58). Other sources include bronze military diplomas awarding Roman citizenship to auxiliaries. They record not just details of the veteran but also their wives and children. Other data available include specifications for the construction of forts and associated buildings. The vital role of inscriptions in providing a temporal framework for other aspects of archaeology is also highlighted. Perhaps most pertinent is the recognition that the illiterate native British have no voice in the Roman written record, despite the inevitable close ties between them and the Roman military.

A fascinating insight into the lives of the Roman elite is afforded by the notes on *The Fasti*, a prosopography of the governors of Roman Britain by Anthony Birley. It provides tantalising glimpses into their social and political lives and leaves the reader keen to read Birley’s original book (Birley 1981), which encompasses issues such as military tactics, political positioning, religious leanings, and the international origins of the ruling class. Perhaps the most intriguing of these documents refers to the mutiny of Legion XX, stating that the governor Maximus, ‘robbed the legions and left them poor’ (p.79). Speculations in the next chapter centre on the nature of the military presence in *Londinium*, which was made up of soldiers from Legions based elsewhere in Britain. A well-argued discussion concludes that it is most likely that

they formed the governor's guard rather than an urban police force or a garrison of seconded soldiers.

A wider discussion of *Londinium* and other urban centres follows, in which *Londinium* is defined as the greatest of the provincial capitals in late Roman Britain. Other aspects of urban life are considered, including the changes affecting the native population as towns took over from hillforts as the focus of centralised settlement. A more specific analysis is presented of the likely administrative roles of the record offices of major towns.

The trade in religious objects, curses and dedications is summarised in a hugely interesting paper. It considers the epigraphic evidence of Roman religious furniture ranging from altars and votive gifts to charms, amulets, and curses. In the case of the latter, examples include victims being cursed with physical ailments, ill health, and an inability to talk. From religion to education, the penultimate chapter in this section considers the possibility of formal education, and even the presence of a university, in Roman Britain. Amongst some of the intriguing insights are the use of Virgil's poems as practice pieces and the possibility that the children of the native elite were sent to a formal school for higher education.

The final section of the book considers the written evidence for the ending of the Roman occupation of Britain. It provides one of the most comprehensive images of a Britain with a greatly altered and reduced military presence, and subsequent increase in the roles of the civilian population.

This is an eclectic and fascinating collection of articles that brings together data on aspects of Roman life ranging from the mechanics of Conquest and the depletion of the Roman army during the 4th century to the artistic depictions of a goddess and the trade in curses. While the essays are thought-provoking in their own right, they lack a discussion to bring together their social implications. Although some additional material is provided where it directly affects the conclusions and mention is made of recent finds, there is no discussion of subsequent work and conflicting or reinforcing research. Some of the papers included add little to the interest or knowledge of life in Roman Britain, such as the piece on military tile stamps that concludes that they

were most prolific in the third century. The book would be no poorer for its omission. Other papers are rather outdated. One such paper equates hillforts with oppida (p. 116). This may have been the line of thought in 1979, but in more recent years, oppida have been defined as a site type in their own right. They are more likely to be original nucleated, high-status settlements rather than hillforts (McOmish 2013).

This is a solid starting volume for anyone interested in the documentary evidence of Roman Britain. Even if some of the papers are a little outdated, attention is drawn to more recent works and relevant finds. The range of topics covered also make it a good read for those with a more general interest in all aspects of life in Roman Britain. In the current climate of inter-disciplinary research, it will be of use to those from other specialist backgrounds. The lack of narrative between individual papers does not necessarily detract from the volume's overall usefulness, but it would have provided an additional layer of contemporary thinking. A synthetic conclusion by Mark Hassall of his area of expertise, combining 30 years work brought up to date with a consideration of more recent research, would have been a good addition to the volume.

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- Birley, A R. 1981. *The Fasti of Roman Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
McOmish, D. 2013. *Oppida. Introduction to heritage assets*. London: Historic England